

# Stranded at the NON-STRIKER'S END

Shakib's Champions Trophy love affair ends in bitter silence

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On October 7, 2006, a nervous yet fearless Shakib Al Hasan stepped onto the field in Mohali for his first ICC event match, just two months after his international debut. Bangladesh had lost that game against a vastly superior Sri Lanka in the Champions Trophy, but the 19-year-old left-hander stood

tall, crafting a team-high, unbeaten 67 – an innings that whispered of the greatness to come.

A little over eighteen years later, that story should have reached its natural conclusion, with Shakib signing off in the very tournament where he first made his mark. Instead, when Bangladesh boarded their flight to the UAE for the Champions Trophy, their

finest product was missing.

The Champions Trophy was supposed to be his final stage. Before the Kanpur Test last year, Shakib spoke openly about bowing

out after the 2025 edition. Instead, his career ended in limbo. The Bangladesh jersey he had worn in battle for nearly two decades never touched his shoulders again.

His absence had little to do with form or age. Off-field turmoil pulled him away. When the Awami League government fell on August 5, the political landscape shifted. Shakib, associated with the ruling party, was caught in the storm. The writing was on the wall.

Then came the final blow. In a County match, his bowling action was reported, leading to suspension following failed bowling action tests. And with that, Shakib's 18 year journey in ICC events ended abruptly after having appeared in a staggering 16 marquee tournaments, featuring five ODI World Cups.

No fitting farewell at a mega event. No last walk to the crease. Yet, the bitter irony remains: Bangladesh might not have even been in the Champions Trophy if not for Shakib.

November 6, 2023. Delhi. Bangladesh were in a free fall following six straight losses in the World Cup. However, qualification for the Champions Trophy was on the line. A loss to Sri Lanka would end Bangladesh's hopes.

Shakib, captain in name and spirit, knew what was at stake. After Sri Lanka had started strong, he struck twice; the dangerous Sadeera Samarawickrama, his second victim. Then came the moment that had the cricket world divided.

Angelo Mathews arrived at the crease late due to a helmet malfunction. Shakib appealed. The umpires had no choice – Mathews was timed out, the first such dismissal in international cricket history. Critics called it unsporting, while others saw it as ruthless pragmatism.

Then, with the bat, he delivered once more. A blistering 82 off 65 balls. A 169-run stand with Najmul Hossain Shanto. It was their first ICC event win over Sri Lanka. More importantly, Bangladesh had finished eighth by the time the tournament ended, qualifying for the Champions Trophy by the slimmest of margins – on net run rate.

And yet, when the team prepared for the Champions Trophy, Shakib remained out of the frame. Even the Bangladesh captain Shanto was left an agitated figure when asked a Shakib-related question in the press conference, which took place before the team departed for the UAE. Can one blame him, though? Entering an ICC event without a player who had managed to somehow station himself mostly at the top of ODI rankings since 2009, it may well be that Shakib's teammates are trying a little too hard to move on without him.

The Champions Trophy had been the setting for some of his finest moments: his debut in 2006; the unforgettable partnership with Mahmudullah in 2017; guiding Bangladesh to their first ever ICC semifinal appearance. And now, it was the stage to complete the circle, culminating an illustrious career.

But life rarely offers the endings we expect. What is lost cannot be blotted, they say, so perhaps this tournament was never meant to be his swansong. Instead, he remains a figure frozen in time.

And so, the curtain falls. Not with a roaring crowd, but with the lingering silence of what could have been.



## Riyad, Mushfiqur's chance to stand out among the 'Big Five'

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

For Bangladesh to stake a claim as a contender in the Champions Trophy, two of their most vital cogs in the machinery must play their roles to perfection.

Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad are the last remaining members of the 'Big Five' of Bangladesh cricket. Mashrafe Bin Mortaza was the first to leave the scene before Tamim Iqbal called it quits, with a final decision on the matter coming only after much speculation right before the Champions Trophy squad announcements. Shakib Al Hasan's involvement in politics did not end well either.

This leaves

Mushfiqur and

Mahmudullah as the sole survivors of a generation that made Bangladesh believe they could stand among the best.

Mushfiqur, with 272 ODIs to his name, has played the most ODIs for the Tigers. His average of 36.75 and a strike rate just under 80 show why Bangladesh has always banked on him. Nine centuries and an astonishing 49 half centuries earned him the tag of 'Mr. Dependable'.

Mahmudullah, too, has witnessed many matches and has kept Bangladesh's hopes alive on numerous occasions. Known as Bangladesh's 'finisher' and the 'silent killer', Mahmudullah has set lofty standards in ICC tournaments, with all four of his ODI centuries coming in ICC events. One of those centuries helped Bangladesh achieve an improbable victory against New Zealand in Cardiff during the 2017 Champions Trophy.

The Tigers went on to play the semifinals in that tournament, marking their best-ever outing in an ICC event to date. The contributions and stories these two players have delivered will not fade, while the ups and downs they have faced throughout their long careers have also defined Bangladesh in the international circuit.

Just as Mushfiqur captured imaginations in a 2012 Asia Cup game against India – delivering a win while batting alongside Shakib in a crucial match to eliminate the giants from the tournament – or as Mahmudullah's ice-cool finish in the Nidahas Trophy against Sri Lanka remains a cherished memory, there have been many high points.

But the defeats have also left their mark. The 2012 Asia Cup final saw Mushfiqur and Shakib in tears, while the 2016 World Cup match against India in Bangalore

remains one of the most heart-breaking moments in Bangladesh's cricket history.

As Mahmudullah and

Mushfiqur prepare for what is likely their final appearance in the Champions Trophy, their roles will extend beyond on-field performances. It will take something extra from them for the Tigers to finally cross the threshold and win a major tournament – something that has eluded the 'Big Five' throughout their careers.

For the first time, the Tigers will enter a major event without Shakib, Tamim,

or Mashrafe. Mahmudullah and Mushfiqur's responsibilities will begin in the dressing room, but they will not end there.

The duo will have to balance Bangladesh's need for aggression in what is expected to be a high-scoring tournament. In the 2023 World Cup, they struggled to provide momentum to an unstable and ever-changing batting lineup. This time, they will need to complement the top order's aggression with their own calculated approach – rotating the strike, building crucial partnerships, and guiding the batting effort. Given their ability to finish strongly with shots all around the wicket, they will provide the stability Bangladesh needs to accelerate on flat tracks.

Their vast experience has long aided the Tigers, but the duo will want to finish with a worthy hurrah. Without Shakib, the onus will now fall on them – not only to inspire but to lead from the front.

"Mahmudullah Riyad Bhai and Mushfiq Bhai's experience should be shared with everyone on the field. They have vast knowledge of the game and the tournament, and it will help us in many ways," skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto said at the final press conference before departing for the tournament.

Now, Mahmudullah and Mushfiqur's final chance has arrived to step up and claim what has remained elusive.

